



THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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The Adventure of the Priory School

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WE have had some dramatic entrances and exits upon our small stage at Baker street, but I cannot recollect anything more sudden and startling than the first appearance of Dr. Thorneycroft Huxtable, M. A., Ph. D., etc.

His card, which seemed too small to carry the weight of his academic distinctions, preceded him by a few seconds, and then he entered himself, so large, so pompous and so dignified that he was the very embodiment of self-possession and solidity. And yet his first action when the door had closed behind him was to stagger against the table, whence he slipped down upon the floor, and there was that majestic figure prostrate and insensible upon our bearskin hearth rug.

We had sprung to our feet, and for a few moments we stared in silent amazement at this ponderous piece of wreckage, which told of some sudden and fatal storm far out on the ocean of life. Then Holmes hurried with a cushion for his head and I with brandy for his lips. The heavy, white face was seamed with lines of trouble; the hanging pouches under the closed eyes were leaden in color; the loose mouth drooped dolorously at the corners; the rolling chins were unshaven. Collar and shirt bore the grime of a long journey, and the hair bristled unkempt from the well-shaped head. It was a sorely stricken man who lay before us.

"What is it, Watson?" asked Holmes. "Absolute exhaustion, possibly mere hunger and fatigue," said I, with my finger on the threadbare pulse, where the stream of life trickled thin and small.

"Return ticket from Mactleton, in the north of England," said Holmes, drawing it from the watch pocket. "It is not 12 o'clock yet. He has certainly been an early starter."

The puckered eyelids had begun to quiver, and now a pair of vacant gray eyes looked up at us. An instant later the man had scrambled on to his feet, his face crimson with shame.

"Forgive this weakness, Mr. Holmes. I have been a little overworked. Thank you, if I might have a glass of milk and a biscuit I have no doubt that I should be better. I came personally, Mr. Holmes, in order to insure that you would return with me. I feared that no telegram would convince you of the absolute urgency of the case."

"When you are quite restored"—"I am quite well again. I cannot imagine how I came to be so weak. I wish you, Mr. Holmes, to come to Mactleton with me by the next train."

My friend shook his head. "My colleague, Dr. Watson, could tell you that we are very busy at present. I am retained in this case of the Perriers' murder, and the Abernethy murder is coming up for trial. Only a very important issue could call me from London at present."

"Important!" Our visitor threw up his hands. "Have you heard nothing of the abduction of the only son of the Duke of Holderness?"

"What! The late cabinet minister?" "Exactly. We had tried to keep it out of the papers, but there was some rumor in the Globe last night, I thought it might have reached your ears."

Holmes shot out his long, thin arm and picked out volume "H" in his encyclopedia of reference.

"Holderness, sixth duke, K. G., P. C.—half the alphabet! Baron George, earl of Carleton—dear me, what a list! Lord lieutenant of Hallamshire since 1900. Married Edith, daughter of Sir Charles Appleford, 1888. Heir and only child, Lord Saltire. Owns about 250,000 acres. Minerals in Lancashire and Wales. Address, Carlton House Terrace, Holderness Hall, Hallamshire; Carleton castle, Bangor, Wales. Lord of the admiralty, 1872; chief secretary of state for— Well, well, this man is certainly one of the greatest subjects of the crown!"

"The greatest and perhaps the wealthiest. I am aware, Mr. Holmes, that you take a very high line in professional matters and that you are prepared to work for the work's sake. I may tell you, however, that his grace has already intimated that a check for £5,000 will be handed over to the person who can tell him where his son is and another thousand to him who can name the man or men who have taken him."

"It is a princely offer," said Holmes. "Watson, I think that we shall accompany Dr. Huxtable back to the north of England. And now, Dr. Huxtable, when you have consumed that milk you will kindly tell me what has happened, when it happened, how it hap-



"I CANNOT IMAGINE HOW I CAME TO BE SO WEAK."

pened and, finally, what Dr. Thorneycroft Huxtable, of the Priory school, near Mactleton, has to do with the matter and why he comes three days before an event—the state of your chin gives the date—to ask for my humble services."

Our visitor had consumed his milk and biscuits. The light had come back to his eyes and the color to his cheeks as he set himself with great vigor and lucidity to explain the situation. "I must inform you, gentlemen, that the Priory is a preparatory school of which I am the founder and principal. Huxtable's Side Lights on Horner's may possibly recall my name to your memories. The Priory is without exception the best and most select preparatory school in England. Lord Leverstoke, the Earl of Blackwater, Sir Cathcart Scrimgeour—they all have intrusted their sons to me. But I felt that my school had reached its zenith when, three weeks ago, the Duke of Holderness, with the intimation that young Lord Saltire, ten years old, his only son and heir, was about to be committed to my charge. Little did I think that this would be the prelude to the most crushing misfortune of my life.

"On May 1 the boy arrived, that being the beginning of the summer term. He was a charming youth, and he soon fell into our ways. I may tell you—I trust that I am not entirely happy at home. It is an open secret that the duke's married life had not been a peaceful one, and the matter had ended in a separation by mutual consent, the duchess taking up her residence in the south of France. This had occurred very shortly before, and the boy's sympathies are known to have been strongly with his mother. He hoped after her departure from Holderness Hall, and it was for this reason that the duke desired to send him to my establishment. In a fortnight the boy was quite at home with us and was apparently absolutely happy.

"He was last seen on the night of May 13—that is, the night of last Monday. His room was on the second floor and was approached through another larger room, in which two boys were sleeping. These boys saw and heard nothing, so that it is certain that young Saltire did not pass out that way. His window was open, and there is a stout ivy plant leading to the ground. We could trace no footmarks below, but it is sure that this is the only possible exit.

"His absence was discovered at 7 o'clock on Tuesday morning. His bed had been slept in. He had dressed himself fully before going off in his usual school suit of black Eton jacket and dark gray trousers. There were no signs that any one had entered the room, and it is quite certain that anything in the nature of cries or a struggle would have been heard, since Caunter, the elder boy in the inner room, is a very light sleeper.

"When Lord Saltire's disappearance was discovered, I at once called a roll of the whole establishment—boys, masters and servants. It was then that we ascertained that Lord Saltire had not been alone in his flight. Holderness, the German master, was missing. His

room was on the second floor at the farther end of the building, facing the same way as Lord Saltire's. His bed had also been slept in, but he had apparently gone away partly dressed, since his shirt and socks were lying on the floor. He had undoubtedly left himself down by the ivy, for we could see the marks of his feet where he had landed on the lawn. His bicycle was kept in a small shed beside this lawn, and it was also gone.

"He had been with me for two years and came with the best references, but he was a silent, moose-like man, not very popular either with masters or boys. No trace could be found of the fugitives, and now, on Thursday morning, we are as ignorant as we were on Tuesday. Inquiry was, of course, made at once at Holderness Hall. It is only a few miles away, and we imagined that in some sudden attack of homesickness the boy had gone back to his father, but nothing had been heard of him. The duke is greatly agitated, and as to me—you have seen yourselves the state of nervous prostration to which the suspense and the responsibility have reduced me. Mr. Holmes, if ever you put forward your full powers I implore you to do so now, for never in your life could you have a case which is more worthy of them."

Sherlock Holmes had listened with the utmost intemperance to the statement of the unhappy schoolmaster. His drawn brows and the deep furrow between them showed that he needed no exhortation to concentrate all his attention upon a problem which, apart from the tremendous interests involved, must appeal so directly to his love of the complex and the unusual. He now drew out his notebook and jotted down one or two memoranda.

"You have been very remiss in not coming to me sooner," said he severely. "You start me on my investigation with a very serious handicap. It is inconceivable, for example, that this ivy and this lawn would have yielded nothing to an expert observer."

"I am not to blame, Mr. Holmes. His grace was extremely desirous to avoid all public scandal. He was afraid of his family unhappiness being dragged before the world. He has a deep horror of anything of the kind."

"But there has been some official investigation?" "Yes, sir, and it has proved most disappointing. An apparent clue was at once obtained, since a boy and a young man were reported to have been seen leaving a neighboring station by an early train. Only last night we had news that the couple had been hunted down in Liverpool, and they prove to have no connection whatever with the matter in hand. Then it was that in my despair and disappointment after a sleepless night I came straight to you by the early train."

"I suppose the local investigation was relaxed while this false clue was being followed up?" "It was entirely dropped."

"So that three days have been wasted. The affair has been most deplorably handled."

"I feel it and admit it."

"And yet the problem should be capable of ultimate solution. I shall be very happy to look into it. Have you

been able to trace any connection between the missing boy and this German master?"

"None at all."

"Was he in the master's class?"

"No; he never exchanged a word with him so far as I know."

"That is certainly very singular. Had the boy a bicycle?"

"No."

"Was any other bicycle missing?"

"No."

"Is that certain?"

"Quite."

"Well, now, you do not mean to seriously suggest that this German rode off upon a bicycle in the dead of the night, bearing the boy in his arms?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what is the theory in your mind?"

"The bicycle may have been a blind. It may have been hidden somewhere and the pair gone off on foot."

"Quite so, but it seems rather an absurd blind, does it not? Were there other bicycles in this shed?"

"Several."

"Would he not have hidden a couple had he desired to give the idea that they had gone off upon them?"

"I suppose he would."

"Of course he would. The blind theory won't go. But the incident is an admirable starting point for an investigation. After all, a bicycle is not an easy thing to conceal or to destroy. One other question. Did any one call to see the boy on the day before he disappeared?"

"No."

"Did he get any letters?"

"Yes, one letter."

"From whom?"

"From his father."

"Do you open the boy's letters?"

"No."

"How do you know it was from the father?"

"The coat of arms was on the envelope, and it was addressed in the duke's peculiar stiff hand. Besides, the duke remembers having written."

"When had he a letter before that?"

"Not for several days."

"Had he ever one from France?"

"No, never."

"You see the point of my questions, of course. Either the boy was carried off by force or he went of his own free will. In the latter case you would expect that some prompting from outside would be needed to make so young a lad do such a thing. If he has had no visitors, that prompting must have come in letters; hence I try to find out who were his correspondents."

"I fear I cannot help you much. His only correspondent, so far as I know, was his own father."

"Who wrote to him on the very day of his disappearance. Were the relations between father and son very friendly?"

"His grace is never very friendly with any one. He is completely immersed in large public questions and is rather inaccessible to all ordinary emotions. But he was always kind to the boy in his own way."

"But the sympathies of the latter were with the mother?"

"Yes."

"Did he say so?"

"No."

"The duke, then?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"Then how could you know?"

"I have had some confidential talks with Mr. James Wilder, his grace's secretary. It was he who gave me the information about Lord Saltire's feelings."

"I see. By the way, that last letter of the duke's—was it found in the boy's room after he was gone?"

"No; he had taken it with him. I think, Mr. Holmes, it is time that we were leaving for Euston."

"I will order a four wheeler. In a quarter of an hour we shall be at your service. If you are telegraphing home, Dr. Huxtable, it would be well to allow the people in your neighborhood to imagine that the inquiry is still going on in Liverpool or wherever else that red herring led your pack. In the meantime I will do a little quiet work at your own doors, and perhaps the scent is not so cold but that two old hounds like Watson and myself may get a sniff of it."

"That evening found us in the cold, bracing atmosphere of the Peak country, in which Dr. Huxtable's famous school is situated. It was already dark when we reached it. A card was lying on the hall table, and the butler whispered something to his master, who turned to us with agitation in every heavy feature.

"The duke is here," said he. "The duke and Mr. Wilder are in the study. Come, gentlemen, and I will introduce you."

I was, of course, familiar with the pictures of the famous statesman, but the man himself was very different from his representation. He was a tall and stately person, scrupulously dressed, with a drawn, thin face and a nose which was grotesquely curved



THE DUKE AND HIS SECRETARY.

and long. His complexion was of a dead pallor, which was more startling by contrast with a long, dwindling beard of vivid red which flowed down over his white waistcoat, with his watch chain gleaming through its fringe. Such was the stately presence who looked stonily at us from the center of Dr. Huxtable's hearth rug. Beside him stood a very young man, whom I understood to be Wilder, the private secretary. He was small, nervous, alert, with intelligent light blue eyes and mobile features. It was he who at once, in an incisive and positive tone, opened the conversation.

"I called this morning, Dr. Huxtable, too late to prevent you from starting for London. I learned that your object was to invite Mr. Sherlock Holmes to undertake the conduct of this case. His grace is surprised, Dr. Huxtable, that you should have taken such a step without consulting him."

"When I learned that the police had failed."

"His grace is by no means convinced that the police have failed."

"But surely, Mr. Wilder—"

"You are well aware, Dr. Huxtable, that his grace is particularly anxious to avoid all public scandal. He prefers to take as few people as possible into his confidence."

"The matter can be easily remedied," said the browbeaten doctor. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes can return to London by the morning train."

"Hardly that, doctor; hardly that," said Holmes in his blandest voice. "This northern air is invigorating and pleasant, so I propose to spend a few days upon your moors and to occupy my mind as best I may. Whether I have the shelter of your roof or of the village inn is, of course, for you to decide."

I could see that the unfortunate doctor was in the last stage of indecision, from which he was rescued by the deep, sonorous voice of the red-headed duke, who boomed out like a dinner gong.

"I agree with Mr. Wilder, Dr. Huxtable, that you would have done wisely to consult me. But since Mr. Holmes has already been taken into your confidence it would indeed be absurd that we should not avail ourselves of his services. Far from going to the inn, Mr. Holmes, I should be pleased if you would come and stay with me at Holderness Hall."

"I thank your grace. For the purposes of my investigation I think that it would be wiser for me to remain at the scene of the mystery."

"Just as you like, Mr. Holmes. Any information which Mr. Wilder or I can give you is, of course, at your disposal."

"It will probably be necessary for me to see you at the hall," said Holmes. "I would only ask you now, sir, whether you have formed any explanation in your own mind as to the mysterious disappearance of your son?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"Excuse me if I allude to that which is painful to you, but I have no alternative. Do you think that the duchess had anything to do with the matter?"

The great minister showed perceptible hesitation.

"I do not think so," he said at last.

"Look at this map. This dark square is the priory school. I'll put a pin in it. Now, this line is the main road. You see that it runs east and west past the school, and you see also that there is no side for a mile either way. If these two folks passed away by road, it

understand that you wrote to your son upon the day when this incident occurred."

"No; I wrote upon the day before."

"Exactly. But he received it on that day?"

"Yes."

"Was there anything in your letter which might have unbalanced him or induced him to take such a step?"

"No, sir; certainly not."

"Did you post that letter yourself?"

The nobleman's reply was interrupted by his secretary, who broke in with some heat.

"His grace is not in the habit of posting letters himself," said he. "This letter was laid with others upon the study table, and I myself put them in the post bag."

"You are sure this one was among them?"

"Yes; I observed it."

"How many letters did your grace write that day?"

"Twenty or thirty. I have a large correspondence. But surely this is somewhat irrelevant."

"Not entirely," said Holmes.

"For my own part," the duke continued, "I have advised the police to turn their attention to the south of France. I have already said that I do not believe that the duchess would encourage so monstrous an action, but the lad had the most wrong-headed opinions, and it is possible that he may have fled to her, aided and abetted by this German. I think, Dr. Huxtable, that we will now return to the hall."

I could see that there were other questions which Holmes would have wished to put, but the nobleman's abrupt manner showed that the interview was at an end. It was evident that his intensely aristocratic nature shrank from his intimate family affairs with a stranger was most abhorrent and that he feared lest every fresh question would throw a fiercer light into the discreetly shadowed corners of his ducal history.

When the nobleman and his secretary had left, my friend flung himself at once with characteristic eagerness into the investigation.

The boy's chamber was carefully examined and yielded nothing save the absolute conviction that it was only through the window that he could have escaped. The German master's room and effects gave no further clue. In his case a trailer of ivy had given way under his weight, and we saw by the light of a lantern the mark on the lawn where his heels had come down. That one dent in the short green grass was the only material witness left of this inexplicable nocturnal flight.

Sherlock Holmes left the house alone and only returned after 11. He had obtained a large Ordnance map of the neighborhood, and this he brought into my room, where he laid it out on the bed, and, having balanced the lamp in the middle of it, he began to smoke over it and occasionally to point out objects of interest with the reeking amber of his pipe.

"This case grows upon me, Watson," said he. "There are decidedly some points of interest in connection with it. In this early stage I want you to realize those geographical features which may have a good deal to do with our investigation."

"Look at this map. This dark square is the priory school. I'll put a pin in it. Now, this line is the main road. You see that it runs east and west past the school, and you see also that there is no side for a mile either way. If these two folks passed away by road, it

was this road."

"Exactly."

"By a singular and happy chance we are able to some extent to check what passed along this road during the night in question. At this point, where my pipe is now resting, a county constable was on duty from 12 to 6. It is, as you perceive, the first crossroad on the east side. This man declares that he was

not absent from his post for an instant, and he is positive that neither boy nor man could have gone that way unseen. I have spoken with this policeman tonight, and he appears to me to be a perfectly reliable person. That blocks this end. We have now to deal with the other. There is an inn here, the Red Bull, the landlady of which was ill. She had sent to Mactleton for a doctor, but he did not arrive until morning, being absent at another case. The people at the inn were alert all night, awaiting his coming, and one or other of them seems to have continually had an eye upon the road. They declare that no one passed. If their evidence is good, then we are fortunate enough to be able to block the west end also to be able to say that the fugitives did not use the road at all."

"But the bicycle?" I objected.

"Quite so. We will come to the bicycle presently. To continue our reasoning, if these people did not go by the road they must have traversed the country to the north of the house or to the south of the house. That is certain. Let us weigh the one against the other. On the south of the house is, as you perceive, a large district of arable land, cut up into small fields, with stone walls between them. There I admit that a bicycle is impossible. We can dismiss the idea. We turn to the country on the north. Here there lies a grove of trees marked as the 'Ragged Shaw,' and on the farther side stretches a great rolling moor, Lower Gill moor, extending for ten miles and sloping gradually upward. Here, at one side of this wilderness, is Holderness Hall, ten miles by road, but only six across the moor. It is a peculiarly desolate plain. A few poor farmers have small holdings, where they rear sheep and cattle. Except these, the plowman and the curlew are the only inhabitants until you come to the Clatterfield highroad. There is a church there, you see, as well as a few cottages and an inn. Beyond that the hills become precipitous. Surely it is here to the north that our quest must lie."

"But the bicycle?" I persisted.

"Well, well," said Holmes impatiently. "A good cyclist does not need a highroad. The moor is intersected with paths, and the moon was at the full. Hello! What is that?"

There was an agitated knock at the door, and an instant afterwards Dr. Huxtable was in the room. In his hand he held a blue cricket cap with a white chevron on the peak.

"At last we have a clue!" he cried. "Thank heaven, at last we are on the dear boy's track! It's his cap!"

"Where was it found?"

"In the van of the gypsies who camped on the moor. They left on Tuesday morning. They know where he is, the rascals! Thank goodness, they are all safe under lock and key. Either the fear of the law or the duke's purse will certainly get out of them all that their hearts are."

"So far so good," said Holmes when the doctor had at last left the room. "It at least bears out the theory that it is on the side of the Lower Gill moor that we must hope for results. The police have really done nothing locally save the arrest of these gypsies. Look here, Watson! There is a water course across the moor. You see it marked here in the map. In some parts it widens into a meadow. This is particularly so in the region between Holderness Hall and the school. It is vain to look elsewhere for tracks in this dry weather, and at that point there is certainly a chance of some record being left. I

(Continued on Eleventh Page)